Final Battles: Few Gains, Many Deaths

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SAIGON, Jan. 24—Neither South Vietnam nor Communist forces are expected to make any significant gains in the last three days of the Vietnam war despite the prospect of intensified efforts by both sides before the cease-fire takes effect.

U.S. intelligence sources said that documents captured in the last week tell of ambitious Communist plans for a final try at extending their control over territory and population. A South Vietnamese army spokesman also privately acknowledged plans for increased activity aimed at reducing Communist enclaves as much as possible.

U.S. military analysts predicted, however, that when the last shots are fired and the cease-fire begins at 8 a.m. Sunday Saigon time the two sides will have done little more than defend what they already hold—at the cost of hundreds of lives.

As for the waning days of the United States' military role in South Vietnam, mili-

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tary sources said that American war planes and naval gunfire would continue hitting Communist targets right up to the last minute, but no increase in offensive action is anticipated unless South Vietnamese troops get into serious trouble somewhere.

A sharp upsurge in Communist-initiated incidents has already been recorded in the past day or so, but the majority have been minor shelling attacks with no major ground assaults reported, according to military communiques.

The attacks have been scattered all around the country from the ruined towns and sandy plains of Quangtri where the government suffered perhaps its greatest setback of the war last May to the swamps and brush of the Uminh Forest in the far south where Vietcong guerrillas have held almost uninterrupted sway.

In contrast to the period in October when a cease-fire first appeared imminent, the captured Communist plans call for actions in the countryside rather than major cities like Saigon and Danang.

The small-scale shellings, road cuttings and terrorism now under way are the best the Communists can do, military officials maintain, in carrying out their commanders' orders for larger actions.

"There is a great difference between their intentions and their capabilities," said one high-ranking U.S. source.

Nonetheless, the breadth of the attacks are a final reminder to Vietnamese everywhere of the Communist presence and may be a inadvertant propaganda plus in providing a viable challenge to President Thieu's claims of military victory. Many of the incidents are in places regarded as pacified only a year ago, but where modest Communist advances during the spring offensive were obscured by bigger battles elsewhere.

It is in the Mekong Delta and the densely-populated provinces around Saigon that Communist efforts are likely to be concentrated in these last days rather than the harsh, unpopulated terrain further north where opposing divisions face each other in conventional battle lines.

The South Vietnamese forces stepped up their operations in the five northern provinces last week, but have so far failed to achieve two of their major objectives there: crossing the Cuaviet River in Quangtri Province and retaking the district town of Hiepduc in Quangtin Province.

Success in the Cuaviet drive is militarily insignificant at this stage, but would have substantial symbolic value as the South Vietnamese seek to regain a hold on the Demilitarized Zone that marks their boundary with North Vietnam.

In his radio speech this morning, Thieu claimed South Vietnamese soveriegnty over land that extends from the Benhai River which runs through the DMZ to the Camau peninsula where the Uminh Forest is located. But at this point, Thieu's armies control neither of his country's geographic extremities.

The heightened activity in the north is continuing, at least officially, but military sources close to the scene do not expect that Saigon's forces will make any last-minute breakthroughs. When the fighting stops, the mountains and valleys where so many of the major battles were fought by U.S. forces will belong to the Communists.

If there is to be one last big confrontation, then most observers expect it in the Michelin rubber plantation northwest of Saigon where elements of three South Vietnamese divisions have been trying to push back the North Vietnamese for two weeks.

It is here that the Communists have adopted a tactic they might not be using if the war's end were not so close. Each morning they emerge from the woods and leave several dozen South Vietnamese prisoners, bloodied and weary, on the dusty road. Then the Communists again disappear.